

# Inter-War Macedonia

Yiannis D. Stefanidis

## I. Macedonia and Greek Politics between the Two World Wars

### Political Instability and Military Intervention, 1922-1926

The inter-war period in Greece, with the exception of Eleutherios Venizelos' four years in power (1928-1932), was characterized by acute political instability and recurrent military interventions. In Macedonia and northern Greece in general, the presence of the bulk of the Greek army was a key factor for the success of any dynamic attempt at seizing power. In fact, during the first years after the Asia Minor disaster, state authority in Macedonia was in the hands of the military. This was largely due to the abnormal conditions created by the continuing tension in Thrace, where the Greek and Turkish armies stood facing each other well into 1923, the uneasy Greek-Bulgarian frontier, as well as the activity of various 'unlawful' elements in the rear of the army. The three-year venture in Asia Minor had distracted the attention of Greek state authority from Macedonia and permitted a rekindling of the autonomist activity of the Bulgaria-based Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). In addition to *komitaji* incursions and espionage, Muslim bands appeared and brigandage was rampant. The situation eventually came under control after the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne and the ensuing exchange of populations.<sup>1</sup>

Following the 1922 revolution, northern Greece was declared in a state of emergency. The extraordinary conditions apart, the presence of General Theodoros Pangalos, commander of the 'Evros Army', in Thessaloniki tended to encourage the intervention of the military in the civil domain. Pangalos himself attempted, not always successfully, to deal with economic and other local issues. His many activities outside the scope of his office as well as his obvious bid for leadership, soon put him at odds with the leaders of the revolutionary regime in Athens,

Colonels Nikolaos Plastiras and Stylianos Gonatas, and led to his removal from the command of the Evros Army in June 1923. Yet the government did not hesitate to employ army units in order to subdue early signs of social unrest, such as a communist-led attempt at a general strike in August 1923.<sup>2</sup>

After external security was restored, military interference in politics remained a stumbling block in the way of normal political conditions. Only three days after the proclamation of general elections, on the night of 21/22 October 1923, a revolt broke out against the Gonatas government. It was organized by a motley combination of royalist elements and disgruntled Venizelist officers, represented by men like General Panagiotis Gargalidis, who had just been replaced in the command of the Thessaloniki-based Third Army Corps. In Thessaloniki the government authorities had known of the plot for some time and they were able to arrest those involved without delay. In the rest of Macedonia, despite the support of most of the major units, the rebels failed to act for five days, thus providing the government with precious time to organize its reaction. Colonel Georgios Kondylis, who was to make a name for himself both as suppressor and successful organizer of military coups, was sent by the government to deal with the situation. Taking advantage of the rebels' inaction, Kondylis was able to restore control of the army in Western and Central Macedonia and, after a skirmish on 28 October 1923, he forced their forces east of the Strymon to surrender.<sup>3</sup> The rebels' failure to gain control of the Macedonian capital proved fatal; a similar failure would cost the Venizelist side dear twelve years later.

The so-called counter-revolution of October played into the hands of the hardliners in the Venizelist camp. A wave of purges in the armed forces helped consolidate the influence of the Military League, a network of predominantly republican officers which had been set up in 1923 in Thessaloniki. Certain of its members, such as Evripidis Bakirtzis and Stephanos Saraphis, would later play a significant role in developments affecting Macedonia. What was more, General Pangalos was able to stage a come-



*Nikolaos Plastiras, leader of the 1922 Revolution, reviewing a guard of honour while on tour in northern Greece.*

back to the command of the Army and the political forefront. There followed elections for the Fourth Constituent Assembly, from which the anti-Venizelist parties abstained. In Macedonia, Venizelos' Liberal Party headed the polls. Despite strong protests from within and without Greece, the Jewish voters of Thessaloniki, like the Muslims in Thrace, had to exercise their rights as part of a separate electoral college electing a fixed number of representatives. A Socialist candidate from Pontos, Ioannis Passalidis, future leader of the postwar Left in Greece, was returned in Thessaloniki. The Communist Party - still named the Socialist Labour Party - contested all the constituencies but failed to return a candidate.<sup>4</sup>

Although Greece was proclaimed a Republic by the Papanastasiou government on 25 March 1924, the activity of the Military League and the antagonism between its factions intensified. The inability of successive governments to deal effectively with the situation in the armed forces encouraged phenomena of insubordination and defiance of political authority. Meanwhile, following the massive influx of refugees and the concomitant decline of wage levels and living standards, Macedonia faced unprecedented social unrest. In autumn 1924 industrial action spread on the initiative of the tobacco workers' unions and bloody

*General Theodoros Pangalos, commander of the reorganized Greek army and future dictator.*







*Alexandros Papanastasiou, a prominent politician of inter-war Greece, who contributed significantly to the development of the Macedonian capital (painting by K. Parthenis).*

incidents occurred in Kavala. These events provided Kondylis, then minister of the Interior, with an opportunity to raise the question of the protection of the 'prevailing social order' against the 'communist menace'.<sup>5</sup> The same 'menace' was employed by Pangalos to justify the imposition of his dictatorship in June 1925. Pangalos owed the success of his coup almost entirely to the support he had secured among the units in northern Greece. The Military League of Thessaloniki, which comprised 500 to 600 officers, backed him in the belief that the organizer of the Evros Army should be able to restore stability and effective government. On 25 June 1925, Pangalos' associates put the 3rd Corps and 4th Corps, in Thessaloniki and Kavala respectively, under their control. The coup succeeded, although in Athens it had secured the support of only one regiment.<sup>6</sup>

Pangalos' authoritarian regime soon degenerated amidst a series of scandals and mismanagement of the country's economic and foreign affairs. At least some of the military factions that had originally supported him began to distance themselves, and, before long, to challenge the regime. On 8-9 April 1926 an abortive attempt against the dictatorship took place in Thessaloniki, in which a leading part was played by

the dictator's former supporters, Lt Colonels Karakouphas and Bakirtzis. The attempt failed because the artillery and air force units backed out at the last moment. Eventually, the officers' organizations abandoned Pangalos who was easily toppled in August 1926.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Period of Normalization: the Ecumenical Cabinet and Venizelos' Four Years**

Greece entered on a more normal political course after the elections of 7 November 1926, held with exemplary order and freedom of expression. Earlier, the prospect of the refugees abstaining from the vote had been averted at the last moment: their organizations had threatened to boycott the elections if at least part of their claims for compensation was not immediately satisfied. The refugee vote secured the Venizelist parties a comfortable edge over their opponents in Macedonia, although they fell short of an absolute majority nationwide. In contrast to the 1923 elections, there were no separate electoral colleges for ethnic-religious communities. The application, for the first time, of the proportional representation system facilitated the election of ten Communist deputies, six of whom were returned by Macedonian districts.<sup>8</sup>

The term of the so-called Ecumenical Cabinet, set up with the participation of both Venizelist and anti-Venizelist parties in December 1926, is generally regarded as a period of positive achievement. After the disillusionment caused by the authoritarian experiment of Pangalos, the military appeared inclined to desist from further interventions. In Macedonia considerable progress was made in the field of refugee settlement. In Thessaloniki the country's second university was founded, on the initiative of Alexandros Papanastasiou. From the outset, this institution developed a distinct progressive character as a forum for new ideas and modernizing trends. It was also a period of relative social peace. Only at the last stage, in June 1928, a strike was started by tobacco workers and soon spread to other trades. There were clashes with the gendarmerie, resulting in the killing of six workers in Kavala. The situation was defused only after strong pressure in parliament, which led to the setting up of a committee to deal with the workers' grievances. The communist movement also went through a period of decline: despite its success in the 1926 elections, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) suffered from successive crises of leadership.

Following the drastic intervention of the Communist International, the party entered a prolonged phase of 'restructuring', from which the position of the younger cadres emerged enhanced. At the root of the crisis lay the reluctance of the older party leaders to conform with the policy of the Comintern in favour of autonomy for Macedonia and Thrace. The party saw its influence shrinking dramatically, to a slender 1.4% in the 1928 elections.<sup>9</sup>

The general election of 19 August 1928 returned a triumphant Eleutherios Venizelos back to the helm of the nation. The application of the so-called 'narrow-wide' plurality system (which combined two sorts of electoral districts, 'narrow' in Old Greece and 'wide' in the New Lands, with the party heading the poll in a particular district winning all seats) gave the Venizelists all the seats in Macedonia. As it had been the case in 1923, the Jewish voters of Thessaloniki voted separately.<sup>10</sup> Venizelos' four years in power were marked by remarkable progress in ambitious works in Macedonia, particularly reclamation projects: the drainage of the marshy Yannitsa basin in the Axios valley and its conversion to fertile land, and the drainage and irrigation works in the Strymon valley. These projects became a bone of contention between British and American contractors. Eventually, the works in the Axios valley were undertaken by the American Foundation Company, while those of the Strymon went to the British Monks and Ulen. Their realization not only transformed the face of the Macedonian countryside but also contributed substantially to the national economy, promoting Venizelos' policy for the full restitution of property to landless peasants and refugees. In the case of the latter, Venizelos, in his pursuit of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement, proceeded with the summary clearing of mutual claims stemming from the properties abandoned by the exchanged populations. Instead of further payment of compensations, Venizelos preferred to press forward with the completion of refugee settlement. However, the Ankara Convention of 1930 provoked fierce reaction on the part of certain refugee politicians and afforded the opposition (Kondylis in particular), with a unique opportunity to erode the solid refugee basis of Venizelism.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Great Depression. Return to Civil Strife**

The Great Depression that shattered the world economy after 1929 cut the ground from under Venizelos' ambitious plans for economic recovery. The impact of the crisis was most painfully felt in



*Colonel Georgios Kondylis.*

Macedonia. Its eastern, tobacco-producing regions and urban centres were most afflicted. Tens of thousands of families, mostly refugees, lost their sole source of income as international demand for tobacco products plummeted: between 1929 and 1933 Greek tobacco exports lost 81% of their value with a corresponding 50% decrease in production. Strict exchange regulations crippled those industries that depended on imports of raw materials, such as the sizable textile industry of Naoussa. The sharp decline of international trade could not but affect a traditional commercial centre such as Thessaloniki. Stagnation led to a sharp rise in unemployment, while bankruptcies and fraudulent cases of arson assumed epidemic proportions. The crisis culminated in 1932, when it combined with the exceptionally severe winter to threaten the very survival of the poorer classes. A common feature in Depression-stricken European cities, public meals or soup-kitchens were set up by the local authorities in an effort to alleviate the plight of the urban poor. In the winter of 1932, they provided 'a meagre sustenance' to some 40,000 unemployed and members of their families.<sup>12</sup>





*Eleutherios voting in the 1933 elections.*

The political consequences of the Depression were felt before long. In by-election for the mayor of Thessaloniki in December 1930, the Communist candidate doubled his share of the vote from the previous contest of September 1929 to nearly 8.5%. Communist influence was on the increase in the tobacco-producing centres of Eastern Macedonia, too. The government reacted by the strict application of a new law punishing subversive activity against the country's 'prevailing social system' or its territorial integrity, the so-called *Idionymon* (Law 4229/1929). During the first year of its application nearly 2,000 people were arrested, including a number of servicemen, while in early 1930 the communist 'United' General Confederation of Labour, the tobacco-workers' federation and the Labour Centre of Thessaloniki were dissolved by the courts. In July 1931 the measure of preventive deportation, originally decreed by the Pangalos regime, was brought back in force. According to its introductory report, the Act was dictated by the "recently intensified activity of communist circles". By the end of 1932, these measures had led to 1,544 persons being sentenced to various terms of imprisonment or displacement.<sup>13</sup>

At about the same time, in part as a reaction to the increasing communist activity, various organizations of a fascist outlook appeared in Macedonia, the most noteworthy among them being the Hellas National Union (EEE), which in 1931 claimed a membership of 7,000 (of which 3,000 in Thessaloniki). This organization, whose members could be seen holding parades in the streets of Thessaloniki on the fascist model, acquired some following among the refugee youth in particular, with the encouragement of extreme nationalist elements in the Liberal Party. Its targets included not only Communists and tradeunionists but also the Jews. The anti-Semitic campaign of the EEE in Thessaloniki culminated in the brutal arson of houses and shops in the Jewish quarter of Campbell, in June 1931. The editor of a prominent Venizelist newspaper of the city stood trial as the main instigator of the attack. Such incidents reflected in an extreme way the growing socio-economic cleavage between refugees and Jews, which found political expression in the Venizelist - anti-Venizelist rivalry. Relations between the two major elements of the population of Thessaloniki deteriorated further after the fall of Venizelism from power in 1933.<sup>14</sup>

The elections of 25 September 1932, which were held under the system of proportional representation, registered the considerable decline of the - fragmented - Venizelist vote and the corresponding rise of the anti-Venizelist coalition, dominated by Panagis Tsaldaris' People's Party. Quite impressive was the success of the Agrarian Party, particularly in Eastern Macedonia. The KKE appeared to recover the ground lost in the previous elections, electing five deputies in Macedonia. As the results did not return either of the two dominant coalitions with an absolute majority, fresh elections, this time under the 'narrow-wide' plurality system, were proclaimed for 5 March 1933. The anti-Venizelist opposition used every means to infiltrate the traditional Venizelist clientele. Its constituency in Macedonia was mainly confined to the conservative strata of the indigenous population, Christian Orthodox and Jewish. Now there was a calculated attempt to win over at least part of refugee opinion. The question of compensations for the abandoned properties proved a valuable weapon. Indeed, after the signing of the Ankara Convention, Venizelos had not hesitated to declare that no further sums would be paid. His opponents, who had denounced the Convention in 1930, announced on the eve of the elections that they committed themselves to paying the 25% of the compensation originally fixed for refugees and hitherto withheld by the National Bank.

the 25% of the compensation originally fixed for refugees and hitherto withheld by the National Bank. That promise, already used by Kondylis, who had turned anti-Venizelist, in the previous elections, is considered to have influenced the 5 March results, by swaying a small but critical percentage of the refugee vote towards the anti-Venizelist side. The latter secured an absolute majority in chamber, although its overall number of votes was somewhat lower than that of the Venizelist National Coalition.<sup>15</sup>

The abortive attempt of General Plastiras to forestall the transfer of power to the anti-Venizelists was used by the new government of Tsaldaris, Kondylis and Ioannis Metaxas as a pretext for sweeping partisan changes in the administration and the armed and security forces. Intervention of this kind spread to local government: the Venizelist Mayor of Thessaloniki Harisios Vamvakas - as had also been the case with his predecessors - was suspended from office and eventually dismissed on grounds of alleged financial 'malpractices'. As the government employed every method at its disposal to consolidate its position, "political considerations infest[ed] every place of national life", as a British diplomat put it.<sup>16</sup>

Before long, Thessaloniki and its Jewish community found themselves at the centre of political storm raging between the Venizelist and anti-Venizelist camps. Despite the absolute majority of the Tsaldaris government in the chamber of deputies, the Venizelist-dominated upper chamber, the Senate, acted as a serious check upon its legislative initiatives. The opportunity for 'rectifying' the unfavourable balance in the combined sessions of both chambers was given on 23 May 1933, when the special electoral court ruled the electoral segregation of the Jews unconstitutional and annulled the electoral results of both the separate college and the district of Thessaloniki. The government hastened to merge the seats involved into a single electoral district and to proclaim a by-election. Tsaldaris' People's Party had won the two seats of the former Jewish electoral college with 5,754 votes which made up for the Venizelist lead in the rest of the district by several hundred votes. Therefore, the anti-Venizelist side could reasonably hope to secure all 20 seats of the integrated district and redress the balance in the legislature.

The electoral campaign in the Macedonian capital was waged with unprecedented vehemence. The atmosphere had been heavily charged by Plastiras' coup, the wave of purges that followed, and the



*Ioannis Metaxas, a leading figure of the anti-Venizelist camp and future dictator.*

murderous attempt on Venizelos' life in Athens on 6 June 1933. The Liberal leader went to Thessaloniki

*Inter-war Thessaloniki: a political rally at National Defence Av.*







*A political meeting in Thessaloniki before the Venizelist coup of March 1935.*

Metaxas and Ioannis Rallis. Inevitably, the Venizelist campaign took the form of open confrontation with the Jewish element. The bitter memory of November 1920, when the overwhelmingly anti-Venizelist vote of the religious-ethnic minorities had proved fatal for Venizelos and the dream of *Megali Hellas*, served as a rallying factor for the Venizelist, Christian Orthodox supporters, and for the refugees in particular. On the insistence of the local Liberal leaders, and despite Venizelos' objections, no Jewish candidate was included on the Venizelist ticket. Eventually, although the Jews, with the exception of the Communists, backed the anti-Venizelist ticket to a man, the Venizelist National Coalition won a resounding victory, polling 47,176 votes to the 42,656 of its opponents.<sup>17</sup> The Thessaloniki by-election confirmed the cleavage between Venizelism and the Jewish community, while it signalled the return to the Venizelist fold of those refugees who had been lured away by the promises of the opposing side. The Tsaldaris government not only failed to honour its electoral pledge of the 25% compensation payments, but its local representatives consistently spoke up for the particular interests of the natives at the expense of the refugees.<sup>18</sup>

After its failure in Thessaloniki, the Tsaldaris government attempted to load the dice to its favour in future electoral contests - a fairly common practice in Greek politics - by extensive gerrymandering. The electoral reform, nicknamed '*baklava-making*', provided not only for the abolition of separate electoral colleges but in many cases, as in Thessaloniki, subtracted certain, predominantly refugee districts, such as Kilkis, and conveniently merged them into newly established constituencies. As a result, the relative weight of the Jewish vote in Thessaloniki increased and the likelihood of a repetition of the July 1933 results receded. At the same time, the persecution of civil servants and officers on account of their political beliefs intensified, while royalist elements made their presence increasingly felt. On 24 February 1935 supporters of the monarchy staged a rally in Thessaloniki, while an attempt at a republican response was brutally suppressed by the security forces. Furthermore, the government continued the practice of displacement inaugurated by its predecessor amidst a climate of simmering labour discontent. Repression intensified following the remarkable increase of the communist vote in the 1934 municipal elections. The newly elected Communist mayor of



*Leading members of Venizelos' Liberal Party in Thessaloniki (among them Alexandros Zannas, who played a significant role in the 1935 coup).*

crease of the communist vote in the 1934 municipal elections. The newly elected Communist mayor of Kavala, Mitsos Partsalidis, was arrested and imprisoned, while the mayor of Serres Dimitrios Menychtas, was forced to resign his post.<sup>19</sup>

### **The March 1935 Revolt and the Consolidation of the Anti-Venizelist State**

Anti-Venizelist politics had created, particularly in Macedonia, conditions favourable to a dynamic response. The majority of the population apart, Venizelist influence was strong among the army units stationed there. The systematic effort of Kondylis as Minister of War to control the armed forces by retiring or transferring officers to outposts in northern Greece had fostered discontent in the services. On these grounds, the plans for the Venizelist coup, which was launched on 1 March 1935, focused on Macedonia as its centre of activity. The fleet, once captured, was to sail for Thessaloniki and Kavala, the initiated officers would set about taking control of local garrisons and commands. In case that the government in Athens did not give in, a provisional government was to be set up in Thessaloniki and would extend its authority over the rest of the country as circumstances permitted.<sup>20</sup>

However, the coup ring failed to proceed according to plan. In Macedonia, on the night of 1 March, the impression was given that action had been

postponed, while the fleet, already controlled by the rebels, sailed for Crete instead of moving north. Meanwhile, the government was able to subdue the rebellion in Athens and declared the country in a state of siege. Significantly, Kondylis did not move against the rebels in the capital until after he learnt that all was quiet in northern Greece. On the morning of 2 March the authorities in Thessaloniki set about arresting prominent Venizelist politicians and officers. Only later in that day did General Dimitrios Kammenos, commander of the 4th Corps in Kavala, decide to move his units against the government. The VI Division of Serres also sided with the rebels, who made an appeal to the male population to swell their ranks, since the the government had already been calling up reservists in Old Greece. The enthusiastic response to the rebels' call revealed not only the support of the majority of the local population for the revolt but also a desperate lack of supplies, which sufficed for only 5,000 men. Subsequently, instead of moving against Thessaloniki as fast as he could, Kammenos chose to maintain a defensive posture along the Strymon. Having deprived themselves of the advantage of surprise and lacking the support of the fleet, the rebels in Eastern Macedonia remained passive observers of the situation.

On 4 March, assured of the safety of the Macedonian capital, Kondylis went to Thessaloniki to co-ordinate the suppression of the revolt. Distrusting local conscripts, he arranged for the transfer of a force of 10,000 men from the south. On 10 March the





*Skirmishes between government and rebel troops along the Strymon river.*

while a flotilla of government destroyers, attempting an assault against the cruiser *Elli*, caused a number of civilian casualties in the port of Kavala. After initial skirmishes, the rebel leaders considered any further resistance as futile and sought refuge in Bulgarian soil. By the night of 10/11 March the fate of the revolt in Macedonia had been sealed.<sup>21</sup>

The wave of persecution that followed widened the gap between the Venizelist majority of the population of Macedonia and the anti-Venizelist state. It was remarked that during the early days after the suppression of the revolt Eastern Macedonia looked like a country under foreign occupation. There were hundreds of arrests, while a Venizelist officer, Major Stamatis Volanis, was summarily executed in Thessaloniki. The government proceeded with a thorough purging of the civil service and the armed forces. By decree, the Senate was abolished, the constitutional guarantees for judges and civil servants were suspended, while the purges were extended to public utilities. Even private business were obliged to dismiss employees of Venizelist convictions. By a further decree, 1,500 officers of all three services were retired or cashiered. Parliament was dissolved and elections for a constituent assembly were proclaimed. Under the circumstances, the Venizelist parties, with most of their leaders still in prison or in exile, opted for abstention. The vote of 9 June 1935 was cast in conditions of indifference, manifested in the increased abstention and invalid ballots. Many Venizelist voters in protest cast their ballot for the



*Venizelos after the failure of the March coup, which terminated his political career and paved the way for the restoration of the monarchy.*



*Georgios Kondylis with commanders of the government forces during the operations against the Venizelist rebels in Eastern Macedonia on 10 March 1935.*

KKE, which saw its percentage in Macedonia swelling by two-thirds to 13.65%. The application of the plurality system, however, precluded the election of a Communist candidate. Instead, the parties in government had to face a serious challenge from within: the defection of Sotirios Gotzamanis, whose Macedonian Union, of a pronounced regionalist outlook, polled substantially in Western and Central Macedonia, and the local anti-Venizelist ticket of Philippos Dragoumis which secured all six seats in the Florina district.<sup>22</sup>

The avowed purpose of the extremists in the government camp, led by Kondylis and Metaxas - the restoration of the monarchy - was received as an affront to republican opinion in Macedonia. The resolution of the one-sided Assembly on 10 July to hold of a plebiscite on the question of the regime provoked several manifestations of protest in the cities of Macedonia. Public meetings in support of the Republic were violently dispersed by the gendarmerie, as it was the case with the address of Themistoklis Sophoulis, Venizelos' lieutenant, in Thessaloniki on 30 September. Still, for the supporters of the monarchical restoration the Tsaldaris government was too 'soft' to guarantee the outcome of the plebiscite. On 10 October 1935, Kondylis, aided by the chiefs of the armed services, overthrew the government. Ironically, among those arrested as a precaution were Generals Petritis, Katheriotis and Panagiotakos, commander of the Third Corps, who had assisted Kondylis in the suppression of the March revolt. Kondylis virtually imposed a personal dictatorship, abolishing the Republic and turning the plebiscite into a farce. The vote of 3 November took place in conditions of terror, and its outcome - 97.88%

in favour of restoration - was described as the "produce of unprecedented fraud".<sup>23</sup>

*Major Stamatios Volanis, a descendant of a Cretan family, members of which had taken a prominent part in the Macedonian Struggle. He was executed for his role in the March coup.*







*General Panagiotakos, commander of the 3rd Corps in March 1935. Despite his contribution to the suppression of the Venizelist rebellion, he was later arrested on Kondylis' orders as a likely opponent of the restoration.*

The return of King George II seemed for a while to restore conditions of normal political life. Kondylis was eased away and a caretaker government was formed to hold fresh elections. An amnesty was granted to those prosecuted for taking part in the March revolt, while those convicted for the same reason, the cashiered officers included, were pardoned. In this manner, however, the return of the latter to the active list, a fundamental objective of the Venizelist side, was still precluded. Therefore, although the royal gestures went some way towards defusing Venizelist hostility to the new regime, they in no way affected the one-sided, solidly anti-Venizelist composition of the state apparatus and the armed forces in particular. Yet, the elections of 26 January 1936 were held with exemplary order. Under the system of proportional representation neither of the two rival sides secured an absolute majority. In Macedonia, with the exception of the districts of Florina - which included Kastoria as well - and Chalcidice, the Venizelist parties were returned with a clear majority. In Thessaloniki the poll was headed by the exiled Venizelos' Liberal Party with 42%. The

influence of local anti-Venizelist tickets was confirmed. Gotzamanis' Reformist National Party polled nearly 12% in Central Macedonia, electing four deputies, while Dragoumis' ticket in Florina polled a further 11%. In short, the results of the last pre-war elections once more confirmed the political rift between the - predominantly - Venizelist New Lands and anti-Venizelist Old Greece.<sup>24</sup>

Owing to the inconclusive outcome, the Communist Party with its 15 seats emerged as a potential arbitrator in the Chamber. Only a few months earlier the KKE had reversed its tactics: until after the March revolt, which it had condemned as 'fascist', the party had insisted on a relentless struggle against Venizelism. Subsequent developments showed that it was unprepared to benefit from the desperation of the Venizelist-republican masses - part of whom had cast their ballot for the KKE in the elections of June 1935. At the same time, the Communists themselves became targets for Kondylis' regime of oppression. Only after the 7th Congress of the Communist International prescribed the co-operation of the communist parties with all 'democratic forces' in a common front against Fascism, did the KKE leadership attempt a rapprochement with Venizelist elements. Yet it was too late for these tactics to produce immediate results. The attempt to form a 'Popular Front' on the familiar Western European model failed, and the appeal of the KKE leaders for co-operation did not attract but a few minor socialist groupings, mainly from Macedonia. Meanwhile, the 6th Congress of the party had also reversed the slogan of an autonomous or independent Macedonia in favour of a policy of equality for ethnic minorities. These developments had only a minor impact on the electoral performance of the KKE in Macedonia, where with 10% of the vote - compared to the 8.44% of the last election under proportional representation in 1932 - it secured seven seats.<sup>25</sup>

### **Intensification of Social Struggles. The Events of May 1936**

The inconclusive result of 26 January was followed by protracted bargaining and bickering between the two major political sides. The term of the care-taker government of Konstantinos Demertzis was prolonged. On 13 April the Premier died and was succeeded by Ioannis Metaxas, a staunch supporter of the monarchy and leader of a minor, ultra-conservative party. All parties, with the exception of George

Papandreou and the Communists, conceded to Metaxas' appointment as an interim solution. Shortly afterwards, Macedonia and Thessaloniki in particular were shaken by an outburst of labour unrest which was to have a serious impact on Greek political developments. Yet the motives of the workers' action were of an immediately economic character: since the Asia Minor disaster and the influx of cheap refugee labour, the income of the workers and the lower classes had remained at subsistence level. The situation had grown worse as unemployment figures swelled following the Great Depression and prices rocketed after the 1932 devaluation and the severe restrictions on imports. According to a contemporary observer, since 1932 the Greek governments had shown little interest in the "real distress among the working classes", while every instance of labour dissatisfaction was considered by the authorities "automatically as communist agitation, which they (felt) bound to suppress".<sup>26</sup>

On 29 April the tobacco workers' unions of Macedonia went on strike. Despite the promises of Governor General Konstantinos Pallis, ten days passed without a response being given to their demands. Instead, the gendarmerie was put on guard and was ordered to watch the workers' moves closely. Meanwhile, more unions joined in the strike expressing their solidarity with the tobacco workers. On 8 May the strikers held a peaceful meeting of protest in Thessaloniki. Yet when they attempted to march towards Government House to urge acceptance of their demands, they were dispersed by the gendarmerie "with a good deal of light casualties". On the following morning, large crowds gathered again and once more attempted to reach Government House. This time the security forces opened fire at will, killing twelve demonstrators and wounding more than one hundred; there were also some 120 arrests. Following these bloody events, the government ordered the gendarmerie to withdrawal from the scene and the army to take over its duties. At the same time, it was announced that the strikers' demands would be met. After the withdrawal of the gendarmerie, from the afternoon of 9 May to the early hours of 11, no state authority seemed present in the city, with the exception of sporadic army patrols. The local conscripts proved reluctant to take action against their fellow citizens on strike. However, although policing was absent, the means of communication at a standstill and power failures frequent, complete order was maintained. On 10 May the funeral of the victims took place, turning into a long



*The funeral procession for the victims of the May 1936 events in Thessaloniki.*

procession through the main streets of Thessaloniki and a mass meeting at Liberty Square. The Communists made their presence felt with hymns and speeches but the crowd remained largely unprovoked. Effective state authority was re-installed on 11 May, when the gendarmerie, reinforced by army units which had been transferred from Larissa, returned to duty.<sup>27</sup>

Official announcements describing the strike as 'orchestrated' and the bloody events of Thessaloniki as the 'last rehearsal' for communist revolt clearly revealed the attempt of the Metaxas government to convince conservative opinion that the social regime was under deadly threat. Moreover, despite the protests of both the KKE and the Venizelist parties and the numerous charges levelled against it, the gendarmerie was whitewashed. Instead, dozens of workers were arrested and displaced. The sorry epilogue of the May events was played out in Edessa in March 1938, at the trial of workers and Communist leaders accused as instigators of the riots. Out of the dozens initially arrested, only six stood trial. The penalties imposed clearly indicated the flimsiness of the charges: five persons were sentenced to two years' imprisonment and one was acquitted. Yet, the workers' mobilization in May and the strikes that



followed mainly in Eastern Macedonia later that summer offered Metaxas and King George the pretext for suspending constitutional liberties and imposing a dictatorship on 4 August 1936.<sup>28</sup>

### Macedonia Under Dictatorship

The coup of the King and Metaxas did not encounter resistance. Yet the wishful impression of most politicians, to the effect that the state of emergency would be a short interval before matters returned to normal, was dashed before long. A series of emergency legislation - such as compulsory laws 117/1936 punishing communist activity in general, 375/1936 dealing with espionage and the crimes against the external security of the state, or 1075/1938 concerning the security of the social system - provided the 'institutional' armour of the dictatorship and the legal framework for the persecution of its opponents, real or suspected. Of particular significance was compulsory law 376/1936, 'concerning the security of fortified positions', which labelled five outlying prefectures in Macedonia as 'defence areas'; as a result, the military authorities were authorized to deal with any activity they might deem to affect public security.<sup>29</sup>

From the early days of the dictatorship, hundreds of citizens in Macedonia, as well as in the rest of the country, were arrested and deported. Communists, trade-unionists and particularly the militant representatives of the tobacco workers were among the first victims: according to a contemporary observer, several batches of tobacco-workers were regularly banished to remote islands. The organization of the KKE in Macedonia received smashing blows as, within a short period of time, its members found themselves in prison or exile. Moreover, the security forces were prone to interpret any sort of suspect activity as 'communist' and 'subversive'; occasionally, as in May 1938, they did not hesitate to conjure up a 'communist' plot in order to get a free hand on the opponents of the regime. Preventive detention was high on the agenda: in July 1938, following the ill-conceived Venizelist uprising in Crete, mass arrests were immediately effected in Thessaloniki, and among the first to be rounded up were dozens of retired or cashiered officers. These tactics combined with a host of secret policemen and informers to discourage any co-ordinated action against the dictatorship. The most serious attempt in Macedonia was the plot involving the commander of the XII Division of Serres, Major-General Ioannis Tsangaridis, during



*Dictator Metaxas, in one of his numerous public appearances.*

the course of 1938. It was betrayed, however, to the authorities and the plotters, including the general, were arrested.<sup>30</sup>

The oppressive practices of the regime were also applied with ill-effect in a particularly sensitive field: in the context of its extreme nationalist ideology, the dictatorship embarked on a systematic effort to discourage the use of the Slavonic idiom, which was still spoken in parts of Macedonia. The execution of this policy was entrusted to the security forces, whose violent and indiscriminate methods helped alienate the Slavophone element from the Greek administration. The consequences were to be painfully felt during the enemy occupation and the Greek Civil War. In contrast to its harsh treatment of the Slavophones, the dictatorship in general respected the position of the Jewish community, with the exception, of course, of its quite numerous communist element. Yet, there were cases of discrimination, particularly against Jews of foreign nationality, whose residence and work permits were either not renewed or withdrawn at short notice. Finally, young Jews were excluded from the youth organization of

the regime, the notorious EON.<sup>31</sup>

The dictatorship of King George and Metaxas sealed a period during which Macedonia was often at the epicentre of Greek political developments. The preponderant refugee element rendered it a Venizelist and republican stronghold, while its radical and vigorous working class connected Macedonia, and its capital city in particular, with the outstanding moments of the Greek labour movement. On the other hand, due to its politically and geographically strategic position, Macedonia became the 'apple of discord' between the two major political camps of the inter-war years in their relentless struggle for power by either legitimate or forceful means. The dictatorship came as the epilogue to this confrontation, while other factors, already visible, would lend force to the sweeping developments of the coming decade, introducing a new and more dramatic phase in the history of Greek Macedonia. At this point, however, it is worth examining those underlying factors which constituted the social and ethnic background for the developments just outlined.

## II. Social and Ethnic Aspects of Political Developments in Inter-War Macedonia

### The Political Implications of the Exchange of Populations and the Refugee Settlement

The beginning of the inter-war period was marked by an event of cardinal importance for the process of the national and political incorporation of Macedonia into the Greek state: the drastic transformation of the ethnic composition of the area in favour of the Greek element. This development was the outcome of the abrupt and profound changes effected during the tumultuous decade marked by the Balkan Wars, the First World War, and, its dramatic conclusion, the Asia Minor disaster (1912-1922). The Treaty of Neuilly between the victorious Allied Powers and Bulgaria confirmed the Greek sovereignty in Macedonia, while the exchange of populations between Greece, on the one hand, and Bulgaria and

*Members of EPON, Metaxas' quasi-fascist youth organization, in Serres.*







*A refugee train near Kütahya, Asia Minor.*

Turkey, on the other, resulted in the national predominance of Hellenism in this area. Moreover, there were important implications for Greek politics, as the geographical distinction between 'Old Greece' and the 'New Lands' acquired a clear political content.

During the International Conference at Lausanne, on 30 January 1923, Greece and Turkey concluded a convention for the compulsory exchange of their respective minorities. The exchange affected all persons of Christian Orthodox faith living in Turkey, with the exception of those resident in Constantinople, Imvros and Tenedos before the 1918 Armistice, and all Muslims living on Greek soil, with the exception of Western Thrace. Although the exchange officially commenced on 1 May 1923, since the collapse of the front in Asia Minor and the evacuation of Eastern Thrace in September 1922 several hundred thousand Greek-Orthodox refugees had fled to mainland Greece and the Aegean islands. By March 1923, there were a quarter of a million refugees in Macedonia, including several thousand Armenians - most of whom faced an acute problem of survival. Pressing immediate needs, not least the rescue of the remaining Orthodox in Asia Minor, as well as longer-term political considerations compelled Eleutherios Venizelos, then heading the Greek delegation to Lausanne, to pursue the immediate exchange of populations prior to any other arrangement in the dispute with Turkey. The application of the Lausanne Convention primarily affected the Muslim population of Macedonia, which, according to a 1912 census,

constituted 39.4% of the population: the war events of 1912-1922 had not significantly reduced its numbers. With the compulsory and complete departure of this fairly compact population, the way opened for decisively redressing the balance in favour of the Greek element.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in November 1919, Greece and Bulgaria had signed a convention concerning their respective ethnic minorities. This was not a case of compulsory exchange of populations but of voluntary mutual emigration. Thus, although the bulk of the remaining Greeks in Bulgaria chose to emigrate to Greece or abroad, initially only a small number of pro-Bulgarian inhabitants of Macedonia moved in the opposite direction. Only after the beginning of mass refugee settlement did emigration to Bulgaria assume serious proportions.<sup>2</sup>

Refugee settlement *en masse* in Macedonia was a deliberate, primarily political, choice on the part of the revolutionary Gonatas government and its Venizelist supporters. In 1912 the Greek population of Macedonia had been estimated at 513,000 or 42.6% of the total. Following the exchange of populations, nearly 700,000 refugees from Asia Minor, Pontus, and Eastern Thrace were settled in the place of the exchanged Muslims and Bulgarians. Thus, by 1926, the Greek element had achieved indisputable dominance in Macedonia: according to data of the League of Nations for that year, it comprised 88.8% of the total population.<sup>3</sup> Understandably, the consolidation of the Greek character of Macedonia was of immense significance for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Greek state. For a decade since the Balkan Wars, the presence of substantial ethnic-religious minorities orientated towards neighbouring powers with interests conflicting with those of Greece had constituted a serious threat to the security of the newly-acquired northern provinces. Their departure instead deprived future claims on Greek Macedonia of any serious ethnic ground. There were, of course, immediate practical benefits: the departure of the Muslim population, in particular, facilitated the settlement of the uprooted Greek-Orthodox.

Domestic political considerations played an all important part in channeling some three-fifths of the refugee influx towards Macedonia: the conduct of ethnic-religious minorities in two critical past elections, those of May 1915 and November 1920, had been particularly damaging to the Venizelist camp. The fear that an 'alien' ethnic-religious minority might act as an arbiter in future national contests led the government set up after the 1922 Revolution to

proceed with the electoral segregation of such minorities. In Macedonia, after the exchange of populations, the issue was reduced to the presence of the large Jewish community of Thessaloniki. By royal decree in October 1923, separate electoral colleges were instituted for Jewish as well as Muslim voters in Western Thrace to exercise their rights by electing a predetermined number of representatives to the Greek parliament. Formally, this arrangement could be considered as conforming with the obligations of Greece for the protection of its ethnic minorities which stemmed from the Peace Treaties. On the other hand, the measure never acquired constitutional grounds; conversely, it could be seen as a breach of the principle of equality fundamental to all Greek constitutions. Last but not least, there was no attempt at treating the Slavophones of Macedonia in a similar way, as in their case the Greek state refused to acknowledge the existence of a separate minority.<sup>4</sup>

The apparent hostility of the ethnic-religious minorities towards Venizelism could well be interpreted as a reaction against their incorporation into the Greek body politic. The political movement which, under Venizelos' leadership and guidance had dominated Greek politics since 1910, was justifiably perceived as "the principal, most dynamic, and most consistent agent of Greek irredentism and nationalism".<sup>5</sup> In addition, serious economic and social grievances accounted for the minorities' discontent *vis-à-vis* the Venizelist governments. The strains and stresses produced by the exchange of populations and the settlement of refugees exacerbated this rift and turned the minorities towards the anti-Venizelist side for protection. On their part, Venizelos' opponents also sought to win over the support of the 'alien' element under the harsh dilemmas posed by the almost complete attachment of the refugees to Venizelism.<sup>6</sup>

The support of the refugee masses for Venizelism was deeply-rooted. Already in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars, the Greek-Orthodox element of the Ottoman Empire, especially its part living along the western coast of Asia Minor, had been subjected to ruthless persecution which resulted in the first refugee wave towards Greece. Venizelos' policy for the participation of Greece in the First World War on the side of the Entente Powers seemed to offer the only hope for the survival of the Greek communities in their ancestral homes in Asia Minor, Pontus and Thrace. The culmination of this policy into the Treaty of the Sèvres for a moment seemed to realize the most ambitious dreams of the unredeemed Greeks. Sub-

sequently, the disastrous management of the Anatolian campaign by Venizelos' opponents and the national catastrophe that followed confirmed the historical breach between the refugees and anti-Venizelism. This breach broadened after their settlement in Greece, as anti-Venizelist patrons undertook to protect the interests of the natives against the pressures and, occasionally, the discrimination generated by the pressing needs of refugee rehabilitation. This was particularly the case in Macedonia owing to the extensive refugee settlements, a deliberate act of the Venizelist administration. The sudden arrival of a multitude of destitute rural refugee families did not fail to cause deep resentment among the indigenous peasants who had expected to reap the benefits of land reform and the departure of their 'exchangable' neighbours. Similar antagonism developed in urban surroundings, too. Finally, one cannot overlook the attraction of Venizelos' own charismatic personality among the refugee masses: the politician who had brought the vision of the *Megali Idea* nearer to completion, appeared now as the guarantor of their salvation and rehabilitation after the trauma of the Asia Minor disaster.<sup>7</sup>

Since, following the departure of all Muslims and many of the Slavophones, nearly half of the population of Macedonia consisted of refugees, the political domination of the region by the Venizelist side is an essential constant of inter-war Greek politics. The districts of Florina, which included Kastoria, and Chalcidice constituted the two important exceptions. In Chalcidice, in particular, the anti-Venizelist feelings of the natives went back to the time of the First World War, when they were subjected to forceful recruitment by the organs of the Provisional Government, such as "Kondylis and other bullies seconded by Senegalese".<sup>8</sup> Anti-Venizelism also appealed to the local landowners, the more conservative urban strata, the clergy and the professions which felt threatened by the prospect of refugee competition. In expressing these particular interests, a number of politicians with strong local connections distinguished themselves; their influence was due either to family ties, as was the case with the Dragoumis family in Florina and the Dalipis in Kastoria, or dated back to the time of the Macedonian Struggle, with Georgios Tsontos (Vardas) and Konstantinos Mazarakis (Akritis) being the most notable examples in Florina and Pella respectively. A further phenomenon, anti-Venizelist - and anti-refugee - regionalism, was particularly pronounced in the case of Gotzamanis, a maverick of the anti-Venizelist camp who exercised



considerable influence in the districts of Kozani and Pella. These differentiations notwithstanding, the allegiance of the majority of the population of Macedonia to Venizelism confirmed the political cleavage between the New Lands and Old Greece.

### The Slavophones

In Macedonia, the principal division in Greek inter-war politics, that between Venizelism and anti-Venizelism, reflected the underlying cleavage between refugees and natives, with the ethnic-religious minorities constituting an important category of the latter group. In the case of the Slavophones, with the exception of the abortive Politis-Kalfov agreement of 1924, the Greek state recognized the existence only of Greeks speaking a Slavonic idiom. Yet the authorities themselves were aware of a more complex situation. Contemporary reports from prefects in Western Macedonia, in particular, acknowledged that some Slavophones in their districts maintained pro-Bulgarian sentiments<sup>9</sup>, a view which the tragic experience of the 1940s tends to confirm. Among that part of the population, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) still enjoyed a considerable legacy. This organization, which until 1934 maintained an intimate relationship with the Sofia governments, played an important role in curbing the current of Slavophone emigration to Bulgaria after the Neuilly Treaty. The aim was clear: the preservation of ethnic grounds for future claims against Greek sovereignty in the region. However, an estimated 53,000 persons eventually departed for Bulgaria under the terms of the Greek-Bulgarian Convention of Mutual Emigration, while another 39,000 had left immediately after the Bulgarian capitulation in September 1918. The numbers of the remaining pro-Bulgarian Slavophones in inter-war Macedonia are extremely difficult to determine. Besides, the use of the Slavonic language, the mother tongue of a good part of the native rural population in Western and northern Macedonia, had only a very limited value in determining ethnic or national allegiance - as the experience of the Macedonian Struggle had demonstrated. Indeed, part of the Slav-speaking - and, increasingly, bilingual - natives of Greek Macedonia had remained ardently pro-Greek since the time of Ottoman rule. In any case, the only data available, those of the 1926 League of Nations estimate and the Greek census of 1928, register some 82,000 persons who had declared 'Bulgarian' as their mother tongue in a total of one-and-a-half million inhabitants of

Greek Macedonia. This element was largely concentrated in the districts of Florina-Kastoria and Pella.<sup>10</sup>

The policy of combining refugee settlement with the promotion of national homogeneity generated pressures on the pro-Bulgarian element to emigrate. Moreover, the band activity and propaganda campaign of IMRO, particularly intense in the early 1920s, gave cause for excesses against Slavophones. In any case, such incidents ceased as the rule of law was progressively restored. However, the recognition of minority rights to those Slavophones who did not identify themselves as Greeks proved impracticable, souring the relations of this element with the state. As will be seen in the third part of the present chapter, the irredentist claims of Bulgaria and the attitude of Yugoslavia effectively discouraged any thought of conceding special rights to that part of the Slavophone element who might wish them.<sup>11</sup>

Anti-Venizelism constituted the mainstream political expression of the Slavophones. Anti-Venizelist patrons, such as Gotzamanis, on occasion did not hesitate to resort to quasi-racial polemics, in their effort to present themselves as the sole effective protection against the pressures of the Venizelist administration and the antagonism of the refugees. The traditionally exclusive patriarchal organization of the peasant Slavophone communities and their generally low level of social and economic development were further contributing factors to their conservative orientation. Voting for the anti-Venizelists did not exclude a pro-Bulgarian orientation in certain cases, according to the allegations of state officials. During the 1930s, the influence of the KKE was also on the increase, and the party organ, *Rizospastis* ('The Radical'), became a forum for the expression of extreme autonomist tendencies among the Slavophone element. Around 1934 the communist-led and strongly autonomist 'United' IMRO also made its appearance in Greek Macedonia. Its activity, however, could not have been of much effect as the organization ceased to exist by 1936.<sup>12</sup>

### The Jews

The case of the Jewish community presented significant distinct characteristics: the bulk of the *Ladino*-speaking, Sefardic Jews of Macedonia were concentrated in Thessaloniki, while small communities further existed in a few urban centres, mainly in Kavala, Verria and Kastoria. Of course, the



*The Jewish presence in Macedonia, particularly in its capital, had been prominent since the 15th century. This engraving depicts a ceremonial Jewish occasion in the 16th century Thessaloniki.*

ancient Jewish community of Thessaloniki, which in 1912 constituted half the city's population, was by far the most important. Following the incorporation of the city into the Greek state, the community declined in size, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the city's population: from some 70,000 in 1920 to 50,000 within the next two decades.<sup>13</sup> Regarding their position as a political factor, the Jews, unlike the Muslims or the pro-Bulgarian Slavophones, were clearly conscious of their distinct ethnic-religious identity yet lacked a national point of reference outside the limits of the Greek state. The rise of the influence of the Zionist movement among the Thessaloniki Jews after the First World War did not constitute a serious threat to Greek sovereignty. Significantly, many among them, the more well off in particular, chose a nationality other than Greek or opted especially after 1930, to emigrate to Palestine, the 'Promised Land' of the Zionists. Certainly, Greek rule signalled the irreversible decline of the Jewish community both in numbers and economically. First

and foremost, the privileged status which had virtually relieved the Jewish business class of the interventions of the Ottoman administration could not possibly continue. Unlike the Turks, the Greeks constituted serious competitors who would soon displace the Jews from their dominant position in the city's financial life. The arrival of the refugees intensified the antagonism between the two elements, causing it to spread into the field of labour. Indeed, the great majority of the Jews were salaried employees and wage-earners. The influx of a cheap refugee labour force seemed certain to imperil the prospects of the predominantly Jewish - native working class but even to maintain its meagre living standards, far less improve them.<sup>14</sup>

The policy of the inter-war Venizelist governments vis-à-vis the Jews appeared to have two conflicting aspects: on the one hand, a deliberate effort was made towards the gradual integration of this element into Greek society. In this context, a political rapprochement was attempted between Venizelism



and moderate representatives of the Jewish community. At the same time, various privileges which seemed to seclude the Jews from the rest of the Greek society were abolished: these included the exemption from military service, the observation of the Jewish Sabbath as a holiday in Thessaloniki, and the right of foreign schools to provide elementary education in languages other than Greek (the vast majority of Jewish children attended French or Italian schools). On the other hand, the revolutionary government of 1922-1923 had introduced the much-resented political segregation of the community into a separate electoral college, a measure re-enacted by the Venizelos government in 1928. The Jewish community, for its part, under the influence of the Zionist faction, seemed to reject equally any signs of a policy of assimilation and its confinement into a political ghetto; for this reason, it chose to abstain from the 1923 elections. In subsequent electoral contests, the majority of the Jewish electorate maintained its anti-Venizelist attitude, already manifested in the 1915 and 1920 elections. The influence of the KKE was considerable too, and the Jewish working class - along with the tobacco workers - constituted the hard core of the Communist following in Macedonia. The connections of the Jewish element with the labour and

Socialist movement in Macedonia were deeply rooted, dating from the last stage of the Ottoman period and the creation of the Jewish *Federacion Socialista Laboradera* in 1909. In general, with the exception of a short period between 1926 and 1931, the rift between Venizelism and the Jews was clear and, during the 1930s, although remaining predominantly social and political, it assumed sinister overtones as a confrontation between the Jewish and the Greek (the refugee in particular) elements.<sup>15</sup>

### The Settlement of the Refugees in Macedonia

The arrival of the refugee masses, as has already been noted, transformed the social, ethnic and political outlook of Macedonia. The early inter-war period was marked by a momentous effort at refugee rehabilitation through their full and productive integration into the country's society and economy. Initially, securing the very subsistence of these largely destitute persons was a matter of vital priority. Immediate relief was provided by both the Greek state and private charitable organizations, particularly from the USA: by June 1923, the Relief Commission of the American Red Cross had taken upon itself to maintain and provide health care for hundreds of

*Greek refugees.*



Photographie Parisienne - éd. t.



*Refugees in temporary quarters in the Rotunda, a monument of the Roman and Byzantine past of Thessaloniki.*

thousands of refugees in Macedonia and the rest of the country.<sup>16</sup>

The task of final refugee settlement, of course, far exceeded the capabilities of the Greek state, let alone any private initiative. For this reason, the Greek government resorted to the League of Nations, requesting the assistance of the international community in securing the necessary funds. The Council of the newly established international organization accepted the Greek request and decided to assume the supervision of the project as a whole. To this end, a special subcommission of the League was set up, which, in collaboration with the Greek government, produced a plan for dealing with the refugee problem. This plan was jointly approved in the form of a protocol by the Council of the League and the Greek government in Geneva on 29 September 1923. According to its provisions, an autonomous organization, the Refugee Settlement Commission, was set up. It was administered by a four-member Committee, consisting of two foreigners (one of whom had to be from the US) and two Greeks nominated by the League of Nations and the Greek government respectively. Henry Morgenthau, former US ambassador in

Constantinople, was appointed first chairman of the Commission. Further, the Greek government undertook to ensure the material conditions for the success of the Commission's task. Indeed, by 1927 more than 800,000 hectares had been allotted for refugee settlement, three-quarters of them in Macedonia. Moreover, the Greek governments obtained two 'refugee' loans in the international money markets, in 1924 and 1927, procuring some in Macedonia £16.5 million, while another £2.5 million was contributed by the US government as part of the settlement for the Greek War Debt.<sup>17</sup>

Macedonia and Western Thrace, became the Commission's main field of activity. The settlement programme did not necessarily take into account the origin of the refugees, whether rural or urban (the latter element was preponderant by a small margin). Rather, the availability of extensive areas of land, the product of the exchange of populations as well as of the vigorous application of land reform, led the Commission to focus its attention on agricultural settlement. By the end of 1930, when its mission was terminated, it had successfully promoted the productive settlement of some 87,000 refugee families in rural areas of Macedonia, where two-thirds of the



Commission's funds had been allocated. To this end, nearly 31,000 houses were constructed - in addition to the 10,000 completed by the state, reclamation projects were carried out, tools, grain, draught animals and livestock were distributed. The benefits of this activity became apparent from an early stage, as the dramatic decline in mortality and the parallel rise in birth rates within three years of the Commission's inception testified.<sup>18</sup>

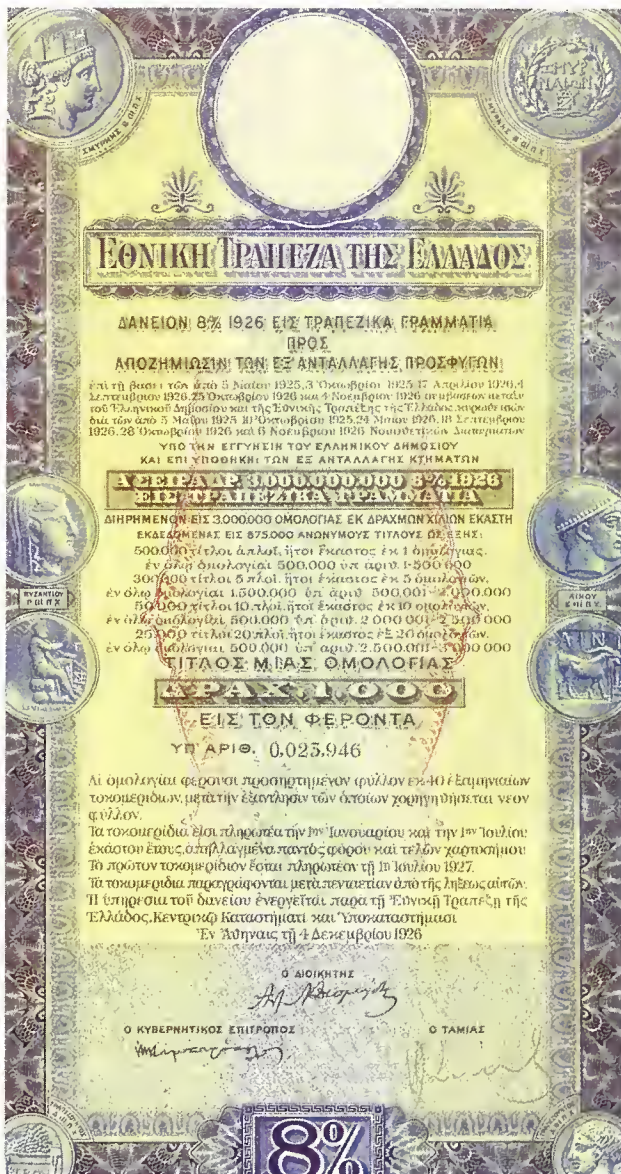
The progress of refugee settlement in urban centres was considerably retarded by the limited opportunities for immediate employment and the lack of housing. Thessaloniki, in particular, saw its population doubling after the influx of 162,000 refugees during the early months after the Asia Minor disaster. Although a large part was subsequently directed towards the countryside and other urban centres, the remaining refugees added to the enormous housing problem created by the Great Fire of 1917. The appropriations of the Commission for urban settlement amounted to just one-fifth of the sums spent on its agricultural programme and were predominantly allotted in Old Greece. In the urban centres of Macedonia its scope of activity was seriously limited by the involvement of the local authorities and private interests, resulting in considerable friction between the Commission's representatives and state organs. On the contrary, in rural areas, the autonomous role of the Commission, along with the decisive material support of the state, seemed to guarantee the successful accomplishment of its mission. A further factor of success was the work of its 2,000-strong Greek personnel, who on the whole carried out their tasks with admirable dedication and efficiency.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, the refugees themselves were undoubtedly the single most important factor in the success of the settlement programme and the general revitalization of Macedonia after 1922. Despite the - complete, in most cases - loss of their fortunes, within a relatively short time the refugees "entirely changed" the face of the country, thanks to their "courage, energy, capacity for work, and receptivity (sic) to new ideas". Their settlement accelerated the implementation of land reform and stimulated the agricultural cooperative movement: a federation of agricultural cooperatives of Macedonia was set up as early as in 1924. Moreover, the knowledge and skills of many of them contributed in all sectors of economic activity. Particular energy was displayed in commerce and business: in Thessaloniki, the newcomers dynamically

challenged and eventually replaced the Jews as the dominant element in these fields. On the other hand, as mentioned before, the destitute urban refugees masses in effect offered an abundant and cheap workforce which, at least temporarily, undermined the position of the native working classes. Generally speaking, however, the relatively rapid and fruitful absorption of the bulk of the refugees into the various sectors of production stimulated the economy by introducing new activities and enlarging the domestic market, even though local levels and structures of production did not permit the full utilization of the refugee potential. The Greek governments, particularly those in power between 1923 and 1932, took a number of measures to facilitate the reinstatement of refugees in landed property, to encourage the establishment of small and medium sized enterprises, and to advance considerable amounts of credit to rural settlers. This policy expressed a conscientious effort to avert the risk of the refugee masses being reduced to an impoverished and socially explosive element, by shoring up their sense of ownership and self-support after the trauma of dislocation.<sup>20</sup>

However, these existed serious causes of resentment. In spite of the impressive progress achieved, refugee settlement, particularly in the urban centres, remained far from complete. In many cases, in which real property was distributed to refugees, the final acquisition of title deeds delayed as it was conditional upon the at least partial payment of its value. The inability or reluctance of many refugees to settle this obligation prolonged the ambiguity until the wholesale cancellation of all refugee debts to the Greek state in 1944. The most serious problem, one which even threatened to undermine refugee allegiance to Venizelism, concerned the compensation claims for their abandoned properties. The matter appeared much more urgent in the case of urban refugees who had not benefited from the largely rural-orientated settlement policy. Under the Lausanne Convention, the compensation of the exchanged persons should primarily fall upon their host country while any outstanding difference would be borne by their country of origin. Yet for five years the matter was endlessly debated without a mutually acceptable estimate of the respective obligations being reached. Given the numerical and financial superiority of the exchanged Greeks, Turkey had every reason to acquiesce in the prolongation of the dispute. The impasse was broken by Prime Minister Venizelos, in the framework of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement: by





A 1926 one-thousand drachma bond of the National Bank of Greece, issued as refugee compensation.

signing the Ankara Convention in 1930, he accepted the summary clearing of the exchanged properties with even a small difference at the expense of Greece. At the same time, he made it clear that no further compensation payments would be forthcoming - something that was in any case beyond the capacity of the Greek Treasury: according to their own statements, the claims of the refugees amounted to one hundred billion drachmas. By 1930, those eligible had on average received only 15% of their claims in cash and state bonds.<sup>21</sup> As it has already been noted, Venizelos' initiative would cost his party appreciably in the 1932 and 1933 elections.

### The Political Identity of the Refugees

The particular needs and demands of the refugees offered fertile ground for political exploitation. Their preponderance in the electoral districts of Central and Eastern Macedonia made their vote a valuable political asset. Yet the inability of the various refugee associations to operate effectively as pressure groups permitted a certain brand of politicians, mostly of refugee origin, the so-called *prosfygopateres* ('fathers of the refugees'), to act as patrons of the refugee vote: by advocating refugee demands to the fullest extent they were able to control these associations and to build up their own clientelist networks in refugee settlements. In election time, most of them ran on national party tickets, the Liberal Party taking the lion's share. Non-refugee politicians also appreciated the importance of refugee support. The case of Georgios Kondylis was a characteristic one: as early as 1924 a group of 23 deputies, 20 of whom were refugees, offered to the then hardline Venizelist and Republican colonel the leadership of a political movement primarily aimed at furthering refugee demands. Later on, in the 1932 and 1933 elections, Kondylis attempted to improve the chances of his party by outbidding his opponents in demagogic support of the refugee claims to compensation. His influence, however, did not survive his eventual adherence to the anti-Venizelist camp. An extreme as well as a unique case of a serious attempt on the part of refugee organizations, particularly in the urban centres, to advance their particular interests by intervening in national politics was the instance of the 1926 elections: wholesale abstention or even autonomous participation in the elections was then threatened unless long-overdue instalments of compensation for exchanged property were immediately paid. The threat proved effective enough for the interim Kondylis government and the Liberal Party to intervene and persuade the National Bank to start payments just four days before the elections.<sup>22</sup>

In general, however, the allegiance of the refugee element to Venizelism and the republican regime constituted an enduring feature of political life in inter-war Macedonia. It was the early adherence of this element to the Venizelist camp that precluded the emergence of autonomous refugee political formations. Instead, the refugees found political expression mainly in Venizelos' Liberal Party, and the lesser Venizelist groups. Refugee members of Parliament accounted for 11% to 15% of the total and were mostly elected in Macedonia and Thrace. Significant-





*State and private relief agencies undertook to alleviate the plight of refugee children with public meals.*

ly, the Venizelist governments normally entrusted the portfolios of Public Welfare and Relief to politicians of refugee origin from Macedonia, such as Leonidas Iasonidis and Emmanouil Emmanouilidis. Native Venizelist politicians also acquired a considerable refugee following and rose to high positions, notably Ioannis Valalas from Kastoria, Dimitrios Dingas and Alexandros Zannas from Thessaloniki, who served as ministers of Agriculture, Education and Aviation respectively.<sup>23</sup>

The strong Venizelist influence and the swift progress made in the field of refugee settlement - especially in rural areas, considerably curtailed the prospects of a swing towards the Left, to the newly established KKE in particular. In urban centres, however, the extremely poor living conditions, low wages and widespread unemployment afflicting the refugee population favoured political radicalization. From an early stage, the KKE attempted to exploit this 'inflammable' social material, even appearing in the 1926 and 1928 elections under the banner of a 'United Front of Workers, Peasants and Refugees'. Despite its relative success in 1926, when two of its refugee candidates were returned, the growth of Communist influence among the refugee element proved an "ex-

tremely slow process". The forerunner of the KKE had vehemently opposed Venizelos' irredentist policy and had waged an intense anti-war campaign during the operations of the Greek army in Asia Minor. Moreover, the party often seemed to consort with anti-Venizelism in supporting the position of the natives *vis-à-vis* the refugees. The single most important obstacle, however, was posed by the party's adoption of the secessionist line of the Communist International on Macedonia and Thrace. This line, which expressly opposed the mass settlement of refugees in northern Greece, was not abandoned until 1935. In any event, during the early 1930s, the effects of the Great Depression and the intensification of social struggles helped increase the appeal of the KKE: from 1931 onwards, about half the party's Central Committee and the majority of its Politburo consisted of refugees.<sup>24</sup>

#### **The Labour Movement and the Role of the Communist Party**

Inter-war Macedonia, particularly Thessaloniki and the urban centres of Eastern Macedonia - Kavala, Serres, and Drama - experienced the development of

a considerable labour movement. In the Macedonian capital, the local unions built upon the tradition of the pioneering *Federacion*. Naturally, the low level of industrialization and the prevalence of small units of production employing negligible numbers of personnel circumscribed the development of a mass labour movement. The field of tobacco processing constituted the main exception, where a few large units employed hundreds of workers each on a seasonal - and often precarious - basis. As a result, tobacco workers developed into the most militant and best organized expression of the labour movement in Macedonia. Significantly, by the 1930s, some 43% of tobacco workers in the entire country were refugees. On the other hand, as has already been noted, the existence of an abundant refugee work force, particularly during the first years following the Asia Minor disaster, undermined the ability of organized labour to bargain effectively for improved conditions. That became clear in August 1923, at the time of an attempted general strike. It was met with stern reaction by the authorities, which dissolved all trade unions, confiscated their assets and suspended labour legislation while the readily available refugee black-legs proved an equally formidable weapon.<sup>25</sup> Soon, however, the refugee workers were to develop into the most radical segment of their class.

To a large extent, the influence of the KKE in Macedonia ran in parallel with the course of the labour movement. It mostly developed in Thessaloniki and the cities of Eastern Macedonia (Kavala, Drama and Serres) where the party controlled important trade unions, including those of the tobacco

*Pontian Communist in exile at the Akronauplia.*



*Avraam Benaroya, founding member of the Socialist Federation labour union of Thessaloniki.*

workers. Its strongest organizations were to be found in these places, where the electoral basis of the KKE was two to three times higher than its national average and accounted for half its strength in parliament. Of particular importance was the support of the Jewish working class in Thessaloniki, accounting for 15% to 22% of the community's vote.<sup>26</sup> Members from Macedonia had always been prominent in the party's higher echelons. For some time, its capital city served as the centre of the Greek Communist movement. There it was founded in 1923, and there were the headquarters of the party youth, the Federation of the Greek Communist Youth (OKNE), which played a leading role in party affairs during the 1920s. After the suppression of the Communist uprising in Bulgaria, Thessaloniki attracted the attention of the Communist International: according to Greek and British intelligence, until at least 1928 the Comintern used the city as a relay station for its activities in Greece and the countries of the Near East. The presence of its organs in the field facilitated the frequent interventions of this Moscow-controlled organization in the





*Nikos Zachariadis, Secretary-General of the Greek Communist Party, which, under his leadership, advocated Macedonian autonomy for some time.*

Greek Communist movement. The first results appeared in 1923-1924 with the removal of the party's historic leadership, including its first members of parliament, Sideris and Couriel, and the veteran leader of the *Federacion*, Avraam Benaroya. The party centre of Thessaloniki produced further leading members, such as Serapheim Maximos, the main spokesman for the KKE in 1924-1926. Towards the end of the 1920s, however, the leading role of Thessaloniki receded as the focus activity of the Communist International moved to the Greek capital and the port of Piraeus.<sup>27</sup>

The course of the Communist movement - not only in Macedonia - was particularly (and negatively) influenced by the policy of the Communist International, which also became the policy of the KKE, on the so-called 'national question' of Macedonia and Thrace. This policy was largely dictated by the long-term interest of Moscow in destabilizing the bour-

geois regimes in the Balkans. Towards this end, the revolutionary potential of Bulgaria seemed to weigh decisively: in that country there was a significant number of refugees from neighbouring countries, adding to the gloomy atmosphere of defeat and frustrated national ambitions. Moreover, the presence of a strong pro-Bulgarian element in the southern Yugoslav province of *Vardarska banovina* facilitated the continuing irredentist activity of IMRO. Last but not least, in Bulgaria there had developed the strongest Communist movement in the Balkans, which in 1923 was in position to forcefully challenge the bourgeois regime. Perceiving an explosive situation worth exploiting, Moscow adopted the Bulgarian view that the national question of Macedonia remained open. Already in 1922 the Comintern had condemned the settlement of refugees in Greek Macedonia and Thrace. International Communism and Bulgarian irredentism in Macedonia seemed to come closer than ever following the suppression of the Communist revolt in Bulgaria in October 1923. In an effort to recover the lost ground, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) attempted a rapprochement with the forces of IMRO. Assisted by Moscow, the BCP managed to have its policy for a 'united and independent Macedonia' endorsed by both the Balkan Communist Federation, the regional branch of the Communist Comintern, and the 5th Congress of the International itself, which was convened in May-June 1924. In a way indicative of the rather nebulous approach to the so-called 'national question' prevailing at the Congress, the relevant resolutions referred vaguely to a 'Macedonian People', while mentioning simultaneously and alternatively various *peoples, nationalities, and population* of Macedonia. What is more, there was no attempt to set up a Macedonian Communist party throughout the inter-war years. The influence of the pro-Communist 'United' IMRO, which was founded by Dimitar Vlachov in 1925, remained fairly limited until its dissolution eleven years later.<sup>28</sup>

The adoption of the Bulgarian views by the Comintern, in spite of the eventual failure of the BCP-IMRO rapprochement, bitterly divided both the Greek and the Serb Communists. In the end, after their leading cadres had been thoroughly purged of dissenters, both parties were brought into line. From its 3rd 'extraordinary' Congress in December 1924 and until 1935, the official positions of the KKE included support for "the right of the peoples of Macedonia and Thrace to self-determination, including secession from Greece and the right to establish a

united and independent state together with other parts of their country".<sup>29</sup> To be sure, its declarations notwithstanding, the KKE did very little to promote the realization of this policy. Significantly, despite the presence of ten Communist deputies in the Chamber after the 1926 elections, no reference whatsoever was made on their part to the 'national question' of Macedonia. This attitude played no small part in the repeated 'restructuring' of the KKE leadership imposed by the Comintern. The party leadership which was eventually installed under Secretary-General Nikos Zachariadis in 1931 appeared to adopt the slogan of Macedonian autonomy or independence in its most extreme form. Before long, however, the issue was quietly dropped from the party's pronouncements following its successive electoral set-backs. The line on the Macedonian Question had already cost the party many prominent members and had helped alienate the refugee element, its rural part in particular, whose position in their new homeland it directly threatened. At the same time, it had offered an effective ideological weapon to the party's adversaries as well as a case for the persecution of its members since the days of the Pangalos dictatorship. On the other hand, the appeal of the KKE among the Slavophones, whom the slogan of autonomy should have attracted, did not appear great enough to offset its obvious ill effects.<sup>30</sup>

In 1935, in view of the rise of Fascism and National Socialism in Europe, the Comintern was compelled to reconsider its line on the Macedonian Question. In order to meet the Fascist challenge, Moscow and the international communist movement had to abandon the tactics of destabilization in the Balkans. Instead, the 7th Congress of the International put forward the cooperation of all 'democratic forces' against Fascism as the principal duty of its members. The IMRO was condemned as Fascist and the slogan of a united and independent Macedonia was dropped. Responding to the new imperative, the 6th Congress of the KKE, which was convened in December 1935, substituted a new declaration asking for "complete equality for minorities" in place of the old line. The official resolution of the 6th Congress at long last recognized the drastic transformation which had been effected in the ethnic composition of Macedonia following the exchange of populations and the settlement of the refugees. Soon, however, it appeared that the breach with the past had been far from complete: the same party resolution pointed out that the Macedonian Question remained open and would only be solved "after the victory of Soviet power in the

Balkans".<sup>31</sup> The attitude of the KKE on this sensitive issue, along with real grievances, foreign propaganda, and Metaxas' short-sighted policy of repression fomented the elements of a crisis which would break out dramatically under the conditions of war and enemy occupation.

### III. Macedonia in the Foreign Relations of Greece, 1923-1939

The Greek foreign policy of the inter-war period - with the sole exception of Pangalos' short-lived dictatorship - had shed all irredentist aspirations and primarily aimed at the preservation of the country's independence and territorial integrity. To this end, it consistently supported the Peace settlement which had followed the First World War, including the Treaty of Lausanne. The safeguarding of Greek sovereignty in Macedonia and Western Thrace, constituted the main preoccupation of this policy, as these two newly acquired territories were in fact the most vulnerable - and most coveted - parts of national territory. As a result of its geographical position - an extensive borderline cut across by the extremely vulnerable Axios (Vardar) valley - the security of Greek Macedonia directly depended upon Greece's relations with its northern neighbours as well as with those European Powers which perceived a special interest in the region. The main problem in this respect arose from the fact that the Sofia governments did not accept the territorial settlement of the Peace Treaties as final. This attitude constituted a real - if not immediate - threat to the security of neighbouring countries and a permanent destabilizing factor in the Balkans. Consequently, the Greek governments attached primary importance to relations with Belgrade. Yet in spite of a common interest in containing Bulgarian revisionism, relations between Greece and Yugoslavia were not entirely in harmony. Inevitably, Macedonia often became the focus of inter-war diplomacy, occupying a central place in the maze of affairs between Athens, Belgrade and Sofia.

#### **Macedonia and the Crisis in Greek-Bulgarian Relations, 1923-1927**

Until the mid-1930s the Bulgarian challenge was manifested in the support which, after the overthrow of the radical Stamboliski government in June 1923, Sofia afforded to continuing activity of IMRO, which



primarily aimed at detaching Macedonian territories from Yugoslavia and Greece. The success of the IMRO's task, ostensibly the autonomy or independence of an extensive area (but for many of its contesting factions its ultimate annexation to mother Bulgaria), postulated the support of at least part of the native Slavophone element. In Greek Macedonia, however, following the exchange of populations and the consolidation of its overwhelmingly Greek ethnic character, the conditions for the development of a secessionist movement had become practically extinct.<sup>1</sup> In the southern *Vardarska* province, however, the Belgrade governments faced a serious situation. The majority of the local Slav and Albanian population had real causes to resent Serbian domination. The dismal living conditions, the settlement of thousands of Serbian families, the exclusion of natives from most places of authority, and, above all, the often violent policy of 'Serbianization' fanned local discontent and provided the ground for the subversive activity of IMRO. This organization was not only supported by Bulgaria or part of the local population but also by non-Balkan powers: Fascist Italy, in particular, whose relations with Belgrade remained tense for most of the inter-war period, was prepared to assist every effort that might create serious trouble for its neighbour.<sup>2</sup>

Sofia, for its part, did not desist from raising the matter of the rights of 'Bulgarian' minorities, particularly with Athens, mostly in connection with the settlement of other outstanding issues. For some time, Greek-Bulgarian relations were beset by the question of a commercial outlet for Bulgaria to the Aegean, in accordance with a provision of the Neuilly Treaty. In spite of the repeated offers on the part of Greek governments of facilities in the ports of Alexandroupolis (Dedeagatch) or of Thessaloniki - on the model of the existing Serbian free zone - the Sofia governments did not appear interested in anything short of cession of territory. A serious problem, however, which further bedevilled relations between the two countries, proved to be the implementation of the Greek-Bulgarian Convention of Mutual Emigration. As has been noted, IMRO influence accounted for the reluctance of many pro-Bulgarian inhabitants of Greek Macedonia to apply for emigration, at a time when the hard pressed Greeks of Bulgaria were virtually left with no option but to depart. What was more, the Mixed Greek-Bulgarian Commission of Emigration, which had been set up to assist in the liquidation of the properties of emigrants and to fix the indemnities owed by either side, proceeded at an

extremely slow pace. Its task, already a complex one, proved impossible as both parties, for varied reasons, appeared reluctant to promote a speedy settlement. Athens, given the eventual preponderance of the emigration movement towards Bulgaria, was not particularly anxious to face the burden arising thereof. Sofia, for its part, preferred to reserve the compensation claims of its own immigrants as a means for exerting pressure on its neighbour. In this attitude the Greek governments did not fail to perceive revisionist considerations and the influence of IMRO.<sup>3</sup>

Distrust of Bulgarian intentions did not permit the implementation of a bilateral agreement reached in Geneva on 29 September 1924. The representatives of Greece and Bulgaria to the Council of the League of Nations, Nikolaos Politis and Hristo Kalfov, signed two protocols which defined the terms for the application of the special Convention on the protection of minorities signed by Greece and the Allied Powers at Sèvres in 1920. A bloody incident at Terlis, near the Greek-Bulgarian border, in July 1924, in which several Slavophone peasants were shot dead by a Greek detachment, had acted as a catalyst for the reaching of the agreement. Yet despite the conciliatory intentions of the then Foreign Minister Georgios Roussos, the Greek political and military leadership was quick to perceive grave dangers to the country's security and its external relations. The protocols clearly implied the existence of a Bulgarian minority in Greece as well as a legitimate interest of Sofia in its fate, thus opening the way to interventions into the internal affairs of its neighbour. Furthermore, the sharp reaction of Yugoslavia proved a compelling factor. Belgrade considered the agreement as establishing a dangerous precedent which threatened to undermine its own policy of 'Serbianization' in the *Vardarska banovina*. Strongly-worded *démarches* were immediately delivered to Athens as part of a pressure campaign which culminated in the 1913 Greek-Serbian treaty of alliance being denounced. In the event, Andreas Michalakopoulos' government sought anxiously to be released from the Geneva protocols, which the Greek Assembly refused to ratify. To this end, the international prestige of Eleutherios Venizelos was resorted to, and the Greek leader was entrusted with the task of presenting the Greek case before the Council of the League in March 1925. The protocols, Venizelos maintained, despite the "praiseworthy intentions" of its initiators, "completely ignored the political reality", which had resulted from the mass exodus of the Greek populations of Bulgaria in contrast to the apparent reluctance



*Nikolaos Politis, who, as representative of Greece at the League of Nations, signed the abortive Greek-Bulgarian protocols.*

of the pro-Bulgarian element in Greece to emigrate. At the same time, Venizelos assured the Council of the Greek government's intention to honour its obligations arising from the Sèvres Convention. His line of argument eventually convinced the League to absolve Greece from ratifying the protocols.<sup>4</sup>

The repudiation of the Politis-Kalfov protocols further strained the already tense Greek-Bulgarian relations. The regime of Alexander Tsankov tolerated the activities of IMRO, which had been instrumental in the overthrow of the preceding Stamboliski government. A firm supporter of this organization, Colonel Volkov, was to serve as minister of War for a considerable period. Under the cover of the authorities, IMRO bands took effective control of the Petrich region, from where they launched frequent raids on to Yugoslav and Greek soil. Frontier incidents were often reported. At the same time, pressure on the Greek element in Bulgaria intensified: the murder of the Greek mayor of Stenimachos in July 1925 was followed by the killing of two more Greeks in September of that year. The reaction of General Pangalos' government included both diplomatic protests and military measures along the border with Bulgaria. Furthermore, a bloody bomb attack in Florina in September 1925 was attributed to IMRO terrorists.<sup>5</sup>

The atmosphere of tension nearly erupted into full-scale armed conflict following a serious frontier incident on 18 October 1925: a Greek officer and two

soldiers were killed when a Bulgarian patrol fired on and subsequently occupied a Greek observation post at Demir Kapu, on Mt Beles. Pangalos considered that the provocation called for a dynamic response, and, against the counsel of foreign diplomats, ordered army units to enter the Bulgarian soil and to occupy Petrich, the centre of *komitaji* activity. Simultaneously with military action, the Greek government delivered an ultimatum to Sofia demanding moral and material compensation as well as the arrest and punishment of those responsible for the killing. Bulgaria immediately appealed to the Council of the League of Nations, which in turn demanded the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of the Greek troops. Subsequently, a special commission of investigation was set up, which submitted its report on 28 November 1925. The invasion of Bulgarian soil was condemned and Greece was charged to pay £45,000 in indemnities to Bulgaria, which for its part was obliged to compensate the family of the Greek officer killed. Finally, in order to assist the two sides in settling future incidents, the Council of the League appointed a team of two Swedish officers to inspect the Greek-Bulgarian frontier.<sup>6</sup>

The crisis in Greek-Bulgarian relations was soon defused. By May 1926, the Bulgarian indemnities had been paid, while the team of observers had only one minor incident to report until its mission terminated a year later. In December 1927, the Finance Ministers of Greece and Bulgaria, Georgios Kaphantaris and





*Georgios Karhantaris: as Minister of Finance in 1927, he concluded an agreement for the settlement of outstanding financial issues arising from the Greek-Bulgarian convention on mutual emigration.*

Mollov, signed an agreement settling the financial consequences of mutual emigration, whereby Greece undertook to meet the outstanding balance. Further improvement, however, which visiting parties of journalists and MPs were designed to promote, was overshadowed by the continuing activity of IMRO. The situation was particularly serious in southern Yugoslavia, and soon Bulgaria's neighbours were joined by the Western powers in common representations to Sofia. Cases of organized *komitaji* activity were revealed in Greek Macedonia too: in September 1927 the authorities arrested a group of Bulgarians who had infiltrated Greek territory with the aim of carrying out terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup>

Now, however, besides the virtual elimination, at least in Greek Macedonia, of conditions conducive to its activity, IMRO suffered from the debilitating effects of the protracted internecine feuds which tore the organization apart only a few months after the overthrow of Stamboliski and the consolidation of its influence in official circles. The failure of the contacts

with the Communists in 1924 cost the organization the secession of its left wing and the establishment of the rival 'United' IMRO. More serious was the strife between its two main tendencies, the Federalists, who supported the idea of Macedonian autonomy, and the Supremists or Centralists of Ivan Mihailov, who closely identified themselves with Sofia. The feuds soon evolved into a murderous spiral eliminating most of the organization's leading figures and causing its ultimate degeneration into a group of ruthless terrorists. Yet IMRO continued to influence the policy of the Bulgarian governments in the Macedonian Question until 1934.<sup>8</sup>

### **Macedonia and the Stalemate in Greek-Yugoslav Relations, 1923-1927**

The apparent reluctance of the Bulgarian governments to accept the territorial settlement of the Treaties as final seemed to necessitate an understanding between Greece and its other Balkan neighbours. The attitude of Yugoslavia, in particular, was of vital importance for the safeguarding of Greek sovereignty in Macedonia. Indeed, during the early inter-war period, the preservation of the old Greek-Serbian alliance remained a pivotal element of Greek foreign policy. However, the Bulgarian attitude notwithstanding, the course of Greek-Yugoslav relations was beset by Belgrade's claims, particularly with regard to Greek Macedonia. One of the seemingly 'technical' issues, with serious political implications, concerned the Yugoslav free zone at the port of Thessaloniki: an agreement was reached in Belgrade on 10 May 1923, whereby Greece leased 9.4 hectares to Yugoslavia for a period of fifty years; two further protocols, ratified in October of that year, set out the terms of operation of the agreement while safeguarding the sovereign rights of Greece. Yet Belgrade persistently raised further claims for tariff exemptions and other privileges in connection with the Thessaloniki-Gevgelija railway. Having obtained the shares of the operating company, the Yugoslav government sought to extend its control of the service into Greek soil. Financial motives apart, this attempt primarily aimed at securing an unimpeded route of supplies to Yugoslavia if need be.<sup>9</sup>

The signing of the Greek-Bulgarian protocols on the protection of minorities in September 1924 was used by Belgrade in order to exact the renegotiation of all bilateral issues with Athens. While denouncing the Greek-Serbian alliance of 1913, the government

of Nikola Pašić brought forward the expansion of the free zone, a special tariff regime and joint administration of the Thessaloniki-Gevgelija railway, as well as the recognition of the Slavophones of Greek Macedonia as a Serbian minority. The Michalakopoulos government for its part, in addition to repudiating the Politis-Kalfov agreement, promptly reduced the tariffs on Yugoslav imports and took steps to improve the facilities at the port of Thessaloniki. However, the talks on a new treaty collapsed shortly before General Pangalos came to power. At about that time, the attempt of the Greek government to secure for the Slavophones of Macedonia the right of education in their own vernacular foundered upon the objections of Sofia, which demanded the introduction of the Bulgarian language, and the protests of Belgrade, which counterproposed the use of Serbo-Croat.<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, the Greek government would

*Andreas Michalakopoulos, Foreign Minister  
in 1928-1932.*



treat this element merely as Slav-speaking Greeks.

In general, by 1925-1926, the diplomatic position of Greece *vis-à-vis* its Balkan neighbours had considerably weakened. Pangalos' ill-conceived military action against Bulgaria was a further blow to the country's international prestige. Moreover, his ambition of reversing the settlement of the Treaty of Lausanne combined with his apprehension of a possible Sofia-Belgrade understanding to compel him to restore the old Greek-Serbian alliance at every cost. Belgrade was quick to exploit the occasion in order to advance its claims. In this respect, it enjoyed the full support of France, which considered a strong Yugoslavia as the best guarantee of its interests in South-Eastern Europe. At the same time, the Yugoslav government took advantage of the non-recognition of minority rights to the Slavophones of Macedonia in order to step up its pressure on Athens: while its minister lodged an official protest in December 1925, anti-Greek agitation was stirred up in Yugoslav cities and continued well into the following year.<sup>11</sup>

Under these circumstances, the signing of a treaty of friendship and arbitration in August 1926 all but completely satisfied Yugoslav demands. A convention on minorities was also concluded, recognizing a 'Serbian' minority in Macedonia, while by another convention Yugoslav citizenship was granted to some 400 Slavophone families. It became apparent that a dangerous precedent was about to be established, which could prove detrimental to Greek sovereignty in Macedonia; however, such a prospect was forestalled thanks to the overthrow of the dictator only a few days after the signing of the agreements. Among the first acts of the all-party Zaimis cabinet formed in November 1926 was to make it clear to Belgrade that it did not consider Pangalos' initiatives as binding and to ask for fresh talks on an entirely new basis. Finally, in August 1927, the Greek parliament rejected without debate the 1926 agreements as null and void.<sup>12</sup>

Initially, Belgrade appeared to insist on the full observation of its accords with Pangalos. Yet events such as the conclusion of a pact reducing Albania to a satellite of Italy and the concurrent tension in relations between Rome and Belgrade compelled the latter to lower its tones and merely temporize. In the course of 1927 the Greek government submitted a series of proposals for the settlement of all outstanding bilateral issues on the basis of the May 1923 Convention, with the League of Nations acting as





*Venizelos with French Prime Minister Aristide Briand in Paris in 1928.*

arbitrator. Of particular interest was the invitation of Michalakopoulos, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, to his colleagues not only of Yugoslavia, but also of Romania, Czechoslovakia and Poland, to negotiate a multilateral agreement on international transit trade through the port of Thessaloniki. This proposal met with indifference from Belgrade, whose attitude revealed its true intention, namely the effective control of the port in case of emergency. Besides, the commercial value of Thessaloniki to Yugoslav trade remained minimal, as only 2.5% to 3% of its annual volume passed through the port, while until the end of 1927 no serious work had commenced at the Yugoslav zone. Led by security considerations, Belgrade then sought a defence pact, while the Greek government counterproposed a treaty of friendship which would restore Greek-Yugoslav relations to a proper footing without being directed against a third,

particularly a non-Balkan, power. For these reasons, the talks, which were resumed in December 1927, soon stalled.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Developments During Venizelos' Four Years, 1928-1932**

The impasse in the relations of Greece with its neighbours was broken by Venizelos' vigorous foreign policy shortly after his triumphal come-back in the summer of 1928. Venizelos' initiatives had been preceded by the signing of a pact of friendship between Greece and Romania, which for many signified the end to Greece's postwar diplomatic isolation. The first results of Venizelos' policy became manifest as early as in September 1928, with the signing of the Greek-Italian treaty of friendship. Although this document provided for neutrality in case of one of the signatories coming under attack, Mussolini himself offered to guarantee the Greek sovereignty in Macedonia in case of an external threat. Given the state of tension between Rome and Belgrade, it became clear that what the *Duce* had in mind was a Yugoslav attempt to expand towards the Aegean.<sup>14</sup> The understanding with Rome was skilfully employed by Venizelos to improve the diplomatic position of Greece *vis-à-vis* Yugoslavia and its principal ally and protector, France. While in Paris, the Greek leader pointed out to the French Premier Aristide Briand that the persistent Yugoslav claims might well entail a threat against Thessaloniki; if that was the case, Greece would have no option but to seek the support of Italy. Yet he left the French premier in no doubt as to his sincere intentions to promote a Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement on the basis of equality and mutual respect. Venizelos' reasoning appealed to Briand and secured the favourable attitude of France during the following stage. The Yugoslavs dropped their claims for the free passage of military supplies in time of war and the extension of their rights in the zone of Thessaloniki. As a result, two protocols were signed in Belgrade on 11 October 1928 settling the questions of the Yugoslav zone and the Thessaloniki-Gevgelija line with complete respect for Greek sovereign rights.<sup>15</sup> The talks for a final agreement were concluded sooner than expected owing to domestic developments in Yugoslavia: in early 1929, a protracted political crisis resulted in the imposition of a personal dictatorship by King Alexander. The new regime proceeded to conclude a Treaty of Friendship, Conciliation and Judicial Arbitration with Greece on 27 March 1929, which con-



*A view of the port of Thessaloniki, symbol of the desire of both Serbs and Bulgarians for an 'outlet' on the Aegean.*

firmed the adherence of both parties to the regime established by the Peace Treaties. At the same time, Belgrade agreed to cede all its rights over the Thessaloniki-Gevgelija line to the Greek government for twenty million francs.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to Greek-Bulgarian relations, Venizelos' policy of promoting the country's security through bilateral agreements ran into severe obstacles. Apart from Sofia's underlying rejection of existing frontiers, progress in this field stumbled over its insistence - under the influence of IMRO - on keeping the Macedonian Question alive, as well as on the distrustful attitude of Yugoslavia. The recognition of minority rights for the Slavophones in Macedonia constituted a serious aspect of the problem. A Bulgarian *démarche* to this effect was rejected by the Greek government in early 1929, but the matter was brought up again at the meeting of the foreign ministers of the two countries in Geneva in September 1930. Replying to his Bulgarian colleague Burov, Michalakopoulos pointed out that a Greek concession on this account would not fail to upset relations with Belgrade, as had been the case with the Politis-Kalfov protocols. He seemed to suggest, however, that the

matter could be given fresh study, provided that Bulgaria unequivocally and publicly recognized the territorial settlement of the Peace Treaties.<sup>17</sup>

This allusion was in line with Venizelos' view that Bulgaria's reconciliation with its neighbours would improve dramatically the prospects for security and stability in the Balkans. The Greek Prime Minister ventured to communicate his ideas to the Yugoslav Foreign Minister Marinković during the latter's visit to Athens in December 1930: invoking his own record of Greek-Turkish reconciliation, Venizelos suggested that a Bulgarian minority should be recognized in southern Yugoslavia - the implication being that Greece would act likewise - in return for Bulgaria's formal declaration that it accepted the existing frontiers as final and the suppression of IMRO; to this end, the mediation of the Western Powers and Turkey might be sought. Far from being attracted to the scheme, Marinković curtly rejected Venizelos' proposal as constituting interference in the internal affairs of his country. Michalakopoulos was not in agreement with Venizelos' reasoning either but he personally favoured a hard line: it seemed rather doubtful whether concessions of that kind could com-



pel Sofia to reverse its policy, at least for as long as IMRO maintained its strongholds within the Bulgarian government and the army.<sup>18</sup>

Greek-Bulgarian relations were further perplexed by the set of economic problems already mentioned, with serious political implications: with regard to the question of a Bulgarian commercial outlet on the Aegean, Sofia ignored Venizelos' renewed offer of a free zone in Thessaloniki or Alexandroupolis. The Greek General Staff, for its part, opposed the idea of extending the railway connection to either side of the border, thus facilitating Bulgaria's access to the Mediterranean. Some progress was achieved towards the definition of mutual financial obligations arising from the Convention on mutual emigration. Although serious reservations were expressed, in December 1928 the Greek parliament ratified the Kaphandaris-Mollov agreement for the settlement of mutual compensation claims, which entailed a considerable burden for Greece. Yet the Greek government made its fulfilment conditional upon the payment of the Bulgarian war reparations. In fact, an agreement was reached in January 1930 whereby the Bulgarian government undertook to pay an average annuity of 11 million gold francs for a period of 36 years. Regarding further bilateral issues, the Bulgarian government significantly refused their submission to international arbitration.<sup>19</sup>

The Great Depression afforded Sofia an opportunity to default on its financial obligations. As soon as the Hoover Plan for an one-year moratorium of international debts was announced, the payment of Bulgarian reparations was suspended. In return, the Greek government withheld all disbursements under the Kaphandaris-Mollov agreement. Moreover, in late 1931, the work of the Mixed Commission of Emigration was terminated without a settlement being reached on a number of outstanding issues, which were then referred to the Finance Committee of the League of Nations. The existing differences precluded the renewal of the commercial agreement between the two countries, which expired at the end of 1931. As a result, Bulgarian products suffered from the tenfold increase in Greek tariffs designed to protect domestic production. The impact was particularly adverse on Bulgarian exports, as Greece absorbed nearly one-fifth of their volume. Under these circumstances, the prospects seemed for a Greek-Bulgarian understanding increasingly remote.<sup>20</sup>

A noble attempt towards improving inter-Balkan

relations was initiated in 1930 with the convening of the first Balkan Conference, on the initiative of Papanastasiou, former associate of Venizelos and leader of the Democratic Union. Four such conferences were held in Athens, Istanbul, Bucharest and Thessaloniki between 1930 and 1933, with a last, unofficial, meeting in Athens in 1934. Yet, existing differences tended to undermine the project from the outset: the Bulgarian delegates insisted upon raising minority questions with their neighbours only to meet with the steadfast refusal of the other delegations to discuss the issue; as a result, the Bulgarians withdrew during the Bucharest Conference. In April 1934 it was decided that the fifth Conference should be postponed indefinitely. Later developments would not permit the continuation of this effort.<sup>21</sup>

### The Transformation of the Diplomatic Setting on the Eve of the Second World War

The rise of Adolf Hitler to power and the re-emergence of German expansionism called into question the precarious balance established by the Versailles Settlement. In view of the inactivity of the Western Powers in the face of Fascist aggression, a climate of uncertainty and instability prevailed in Europe, posing serious security dilemmas to those governments still adhering to the *status quo*. In the case of Greece, the cause for anxiety was twofold: Bulgarian revisionism and, from 1936 onwards, Italian expansionism. Under these circumstances, the idea of a Balkan defensive arrangement - on the model of the Central European 'Little Entente' - was put forward and energetically promoted by French diplomacy. Between October 1933 and February 1934 the ground was laid for the conclusion in Athens of the so-called Balkan Pact with the expressed aim of safeguarding the existing territorial order in the region. The Tsaldaris government, seeing no real prospects for a normalization of relations with Bulgaria, considered that Greece ought to align itself with the other 'conservative' Balkan countries: Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia. In the course of 1933, the Greek government had been particularly worried by the prospect of an accommodation between Sofia and Belgrade - a permanent incubus for Greek foreign policy. In such a case, it was feared, the two countries might feel tempted to pursue their claims jointly on Greek Macedonia and Thrace. On the other hand, the exclusion of Bulgaria from the pact further estranged that country from the four signatory powers. Sofia, isolated, invested all its national aspirations in the



*Metaxas addressing the foreign ministers of the Balkan Pact countries, meeting in Athens.*

forces of revisionism in Europe, Italy and Nazi Germany.<sup>22</sup>

The participation of Greece in the so-called Balkan Entente was strongly criticized by Venizelos, who saw his legacy in foreign affairs being dismantled: his policy of bilateral pacts rested on the principle of non-participation in alliances which might bring Greece up against a major European power, Italy in particular. That was exactly what participation in the Balkan Pact entailed. Venizelos' criticism compelled Foreign Minister Dimitrios Maximos to state in Parliament that the guarantees of the Pact applied only in the event that the threat emanated from a Balkan power.<sup>23</sup> This statement helped demonstrate the limited value of the Pact, which, however, constituted a pivotal element of Greek foreign policy until 1940. Before long, however, it became apparent that its existence could not prevent even the much feared understanding between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Contacts between the two states

had been stepped up since the suppression of IMRO by the government of Kimon Georgiev in 1934. In January 1937 the Yugoslav government of Milan Stojadinović proceeded to sign of a treaty of friendship and non-aggression with Bulgaria in blatant disregard of the Balkan Pact, provision which required the prior consent of its partners. At the same time, relations between Athens and Sofia de-teriorated. Metaxas, deeply distrustful of Bulgarian intentions, firmly opposed any idea of concessions to bring Bulgaria into the Pact. In the economic field, while past problems remained unresolved, a further, threefold, increase in Greek tariffs virtually excluded Bulgarian products from the Greek market. At the same time, the construction of an extensive - and costly - fortified line along the Greek-Bulgarian frontier got under way, while the army manoeuvres of October 1937, the first on a large scale after several years, confirmed the primary orientation of the Greek defence planning towards repelling a Bulgarian attack.<sup>24</sup>





*King George II. His return to the throne, and the Metaxas dictatorship, seemed to serve, immediate British interests in Greece.*

Meanwhile, following the Italian attack on Abyssinia and the international tension that ensued, Britain's interest in the Balkans and Greece, in particular, revived. A friendly government in Athens would constitute a major asset for British policy in view of the developing Anglo-Italian antagonism in the Mediterranean. The restoration of the monarchy and the imposition of Metaxas' dictatorship seemed to favour British strategic interests in the region. On the other hand, the obvious expansionist tendencies of Rome left the Greek government with little room for manoeuvre. In a time of a major international crisis, its alignment with the powers supporting the *status quo*, Britain and France, seemed inevitable. Soon, however, it became clear that these powers were not in a position to guarantee the security of Greece effectively, much less to ward off the ap-

proaching storm.<sup>25</sup>

In early 1938 Britain made a last-minute attempt to facilitate a settlement between Bulgaria and the countries of the Balkan Entente. Its immediate aim was to inspire in Sofia a sense of equality *vis-à-vis* its neighbours through the abolition of the disarmament clauses of the Neuilly Treaty. Turkey acted as a mediator in securing the consent of Greece and Romania. In contrast to Bucharest, which demanded a previous non-aggression pact with Sofia, the Metaxas government, despite its record of distrust of Bulgarian intentions, promptly fell into line with the British initiative. On 31 July 1938, Metaxas, acting as chairman of the Balkan Pact Council, and the Bulgarian Premier Giorgi Kioseivanov signed in Thessaloniki a joint declaration whereby Greece and its partners recognized the right of Bulgaria to rearm and accepted the abolition of the demilitarized zones in Thrace, in exchange for a general condemnation of war as a means of settling international disputes. Meanwhile, the Greek government anxiously sought British guarantees, which, however, were not forthcoming. Following the infamous Munich Agreement and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, it became clear that the territorial settlement of the Treaties was open to revision. In Sofia, the event was greeted with irredentist agitation clearly directed against Macedonia and other objectives of Bulgarian revisionism. The short-lived thaw in Greek-Bulgarian relations once more gave its place to coldness and suspicion. According to a British observer, the only tangible result of the much vaunted Thessaloniki Agreement proved the... renaming of a street bearing the name of the Byzantine Emperor Basil the *Voulgaroktonos* (Bulgar slayer) in Thessaloniki!<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, on the eve of the Second World War, Greece was insufficiently prepared and without effective international guarantees in the face of an already visible threat: the occupation of Albania by Italian troops in April 1939 posed a new and grave dilemma for Greek security, which was no longer threatened exclusively from the north. At the same time, the rapid shift in the balance of power in Europe rendered the Balkan states unable to observe their commitments to mutual security. Both the Balkan Pact, having already lost momentum, and the guarantees which Britain and France extended to Greece and Romania in the wake of the Italian invasion of Albania, would prove of no account at the critical moment.<sup>27</sup>



*The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle at the crossroads of Agias Soplhas and Koromila Sts. The latter road was called 'Basil the Bulgar-Slayer St.' until 1938, when it was renamed following the Metaxas-Kiosseivanov agreement.*



YIANNIS D. STEFANIDIS  
INTER-WAR MACEDONIA  
NOTES

I. Macedonia and Greek Politics Between the Two World Wars

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14. Mavrogordatos, *op. cit.*, pp. 255, 258-259; Moutaphis, *op. cit.*, 399-401; PRO, FO 371, 15970, C 1621, Greece, annual report for 1931; 15966, C 3416, consular report, Salonica, 16-30 April 1932; FO 286, 1118/131, consular report, Salonica, 20.4.1933.

15. Elefantis, *op. cit.*, p. 387; *History*, pp. 319, 321; Mavrogordatos, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-215.

16. PRO, FO 286, 1118/131, consular report, Salonica, 20.4.1933.

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